

Chuck Berry Turns 90

By VennerRoad, 11th Oct 2016

Chuck Berry will turn 90 on October 18; incredibly his name is largely unknown to many of today's young music fans.

Including black ones. I had a vivid reminder of this awhile ago at my local supermarket. I was served by a young black girl who was wearing a name badge, [Nadine](#). When I asked her if her father was a Chuck Berry fan [she replied](#) "Who's Chuck Berry?"



Chuck Berry performing in 1997.

I was momentarily stunned but thought better of asking her if she had heard of Stephen Lawrence. Who in the UK has not? There are even people who talk about his legacy; he has none. Not that that is his fault, the poor kid was murdered before he had a chance to develop one, but it is amazing and sickening in equal measure the way his name has been exploited for political reasons.

What is just as amazing albeit in a different sense is the proliferation of black so-called artists who have not a gramme of talent between them. The rise of rap, so-called hip hop, is the ultimate proof of that. True, not all rap is bad, but Scott Joplin must be turning in his grave the way black music, the highest and almost the only real contribution the Negro has made to modern civilisation, has been reduced to crude couplets and obscenities, one beginning with a lower case n and ending in a; the other being made up of two words, of which mother is the polite half.

Okay, just in case you are as ignorant as that shop assistant, “Who’s Chuck Berry?” will now be explained. He is quite simply the most important person in the second half of Twentieth Century music and on into the Twenty-First. He was never the best songwriter in the world; although he was competent, in spite of his unique style (duckwalk included) he was never a great guitarist, and no one except perhaps his wife ever called Chuck nice, but if a man is to be judged by the influence he has on the world and other people – good and bad – then he is the main man.

If you haven’t heard of Chuck Berry you will doubtless have heard of the Rolling Stones; the Beatles (in particular Messrs McCartney, Harrison and Lennon). You will probably have heard of Oasis. Then there is a whole string of artists and rock bands: Eric Clapton, Deep Purple (in particular [Ritchie Blackmore](#)), Mott The Hoople (in particular Ian Hunter), the Electric Light Orchestra (Jeff Lynne), The Kinks, Ted Nugent, Tom Petty...the list goes on. If Chuck Berry had never picked up a guitar, probably none of these people would ever have recorded, and music as it exists today would have been infinitely poorer. So where do we begin?

Rock ’n’ roll and its later derivatives have a long history, evolving

from earlier genres, but the two most influential men in its foundations were both oddities. There was Bill Haley – a white man who played black music; and Chuck Berry – a black man who played white music. They were also chalk and cheese; Haley was a clean cut, polite individual who is best remembered for the massive hit [*Rock Around The Clock*](#) (which he didn't write himself). He did write a few songs, but he was known principally as a performer. Haley died in 1981 at the relatively young age of 55.

Like Haley, Charles Edward Anderson Berry was a relative latecomer to the music scene, but that is where their similarities end. He was born a year later than Haley, at 6.59am on October 18, 1926 at his parents' home: 2520 Goode Avenue, Saint Louis, Missouri, and although he had a good start in life, he didn't make the best of it.

Whether or not he could be said to have fallen in with a bad crowd, the young Chuck ended up serving a ten year stretch for armed robbery. He was paroled on his 21st birthday, and although this was not to be his last clash with the law, the others are not worth mentioning. On his release he trained to become of all things a hairdresser, but music had always been his passion, and he got his big break with *Maybellene*, a song he based on the traditional song *Ida Red*.

Because he was no teen idol, Berry lied about his age, claiming to have been born at San José, California in 1932. He was also a married man, and was still married to the same woman nearly seven decades later!

Of course, there are many others who were in at the birth of rock 'n' roll, and they contributed massively – let's not forget Elvis, for one – but Berry stands head and shoulders above them all; he is the giant on whose shoulders every rock musician since has stood. Unless you are deaf, wherever you live in the world you will have heard at least one song influenced by Berry. [*I Saw Her Standing There*](#) – the first song on the first Beatles album – has Berry written all over it, as does *Back In The USSR*, which was directly inspired by an [*earlier Berry song*](#). Of the Berry compositions you are most likely to have heard, there are:

Brown Eyed Handsome Man, Carol, Johnny B. Goode, Maybellene, Promised Land, Rock And Roll Music, Roll Over Beethoven, Sweet

***Little Sixteen and You Never Can Tell. My Ding-A-Ling* is a story in itself; this adaptation of a 1950s song was released later in Berry's career and was a massive hit, topping the chart on both sides of the Atlantic. Recorded live in Coventry, it led to much simulated outrage from Mrs Mary Whitehouse.**

You will find much footage of Berry on YouTube, and many legendary figures who acknowledge his position in the hierarchy; John Lennon was exaggerating but not by much when he said "If you ever tried to give rock 'n' roll another name you might call it Chuck Berry".

Berry's [official website](#) has not been updated for some time, and he has not been in the best of health, but check it out.